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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: POLICE, PROTESTORS CLASH IN NEW LAND PROTEST

REF: 06 HCMC 625 AND PREVIOUS

¶1. (SBU) Press and HCMC government contacts confirmed on July 3 Internet reporting of a clash between land rights protestors and police in HCMC on July 1. The bulk of the protestors were from the Mekong Delta province of Tien Giang. They sought to overturn a GVN decision to expropriate their land to build a high-voltage power line. Separately, HCMC press reported that in late June, fishermen in the central province of Khanh Hoa clashed with authorities as they protested the construction of a new state-owned shipyard in their fishing grounds and anchorage.

¶2. (SBU) Land protestors from Tien Giang had been assembling in front of the National Assembly offices near the HCMC airport for at least a week prior to the incident. We were told that on June 28, there was an urgent meeting in Hanoi between Nguyen Viet Thanh, Deputy Head of the GVN anti-corruption Committee, and Tien Giang provincial leaders. General Thanh is a native of Tien Giang and a former police general, who has been heavily involved in dealing with land protestors in the past. In the fall of 2006, Thanh met with land protestors in HCMC from the Mekong Delta, HCMC and Tay Ninh provinces, and told them that they must cease their protests if they wished the government address their complaints. He warned that the state would punish those that continued their protests. Shortly following Thanh's warning, the land protests fizzled out.

¶3. (SBU) On June 29, General Thanh, the Tien Giang leaders, and the Chief and Deputy Inspectors for the GVN flew to HCMC to meet with the protestors. They reportedly asked the protestors to return to Tien Giang so that their grievances could be processed, but they refused.

¶4. (SBU) A local government contact confirmed Internet reporting that, the following day, police clashed with protestors in HCMC's District 6, where they were staying. It is unclear thus far, how and why the incident occurred, but our contact told us that police did use force against the protestors. However, he firmly denied that any protestors were killed, however. HCMC's media has not reported on the protests; our contacts indicated that the press is highly unlikely to risk the censors' wrath, despite confirmation of clashes between police and protestors.

¶5. (SBU) Comment: Our contacts in the land rights movement in HCMC claimed not to be connected in any way to the Tien Giang protests. The Tien Giang protestors appear well-organized and briefed in how to exploit the Internet to gain maximum international attention for their cause. Nonetheless, public protest remains a brave act, especially after a powerful Hanoi-based figure traveled to HCMC and told them to end their protest.

¶6. (SBU) Comment Continued. The Tien Giang protest -- as well as the unrelated fisheries protest in Central Vietnam --

reflects the continued frustration of Vietnam's underclass. Based on past experience, they have no confidence that the government and the Party will protect their interests. Thus, they believe they have no effective outlet to challenge official decisions or to obtain fair compensation. The move by protest organizers to "internationalize" the land protests by publicizing them on the Internet is a risky strategy; it is likely that the GVN will seek to mediate a peaceful end to the protest, but later try and identify and arrest organizers, especially if they are affiliated with dissident groups. How government officials deal with the subject of land expropriation and compensation will help determine the pace of major planned infrastructure projects, not just in HCMC, but throughout the South. End Comment.

WINNICK